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Monzó, Quim (1952–present)

- Life: 24-03-1952 –
- Activity: 1972 –

Places

- Spain, Catalonia (Birth; Primary Activity)

Activities

- Novelist and short-story writer (Primary)
- Translator (Other)
- Cartoonist (Other)
- Film/TV script-writer (Other)
- Graphic designer (Other)

Joaquim Monzó i Gómez, known as Quim Monzó, is one of Catalonia's most celebrated and influential contemporary authors. He has published eight short-story collections, three novels and eleven volumes of journalistic opinion pieces. Quim Monzó is also a well-known public figure owing to his participation in several radio and television programmes in Catalonia. Monzó's works have been translated into twenty-six languages, adapted for cinema and honoured with fourteen awards in Catalonia, including the prestigious *Premi Nacional de Literatura* (2000), *Premi Lletra d'Or* (2000) and *Premi d'Honor de les Lletres Catalanes* (2018), as well as the *Premi Crítica Serra d'Or de Literatura i Assaig* on four occasions (1981, 1986, 1994, 1997). Quim Monzó is perhaps the most prominent Catalan-language author in the Spanish literary field: according to Luisa Elena Delgado, Monzó is one of the few Catalan-language authors whose work is habitually reviewed, commented and praised in Spanish media (2014: 203).

Quim Monzó's fiction is considered the main representative of postmodernist writing in contemporary Catalan literature. His short stories and novels generally represent alienated characters in urban settings, through a fragmented and hyperrealist literary style marked with metafictional, intertextual and often (self-)ironic references. Constituting a novelty in the Catalan literary system of the mid-1970s, Monzó's fiction

has been widely received as a modernising element which renovated the Catalan literary language and introduced new topics in line with socio-cultural transformations after the death of Spain's dictator General Francisco Franco in 1975. For this reason, as well as for the significant popular success of his literary fiction, Monzó's work is considered to have been a catalyst for the process of Catalan cultural normalization in the democratic period. Quim Monzó has also modernised the model for public intellectual in post-Francoist Catalonia thanks, on the one hand, to his carefully crafted and often comical authorial persona, which engages with the non-specialist public through mass media participation and, on the other, to an intellectual project which blurs the boundaries between fiction and journalism, between high and low culture and between written texts and the audio-visual.

Born in 1952 to a Catalan father and Andalusian mother in the Barcelona's working-class neighbourhood of Sants, Monzó experienced the effervescent social and cultural atmosphere of early 1970s Barcelona. The new cultural global trends of the late 1960s and the relaxation of Francoist censorship, as well as a greater tolerance towards Catalan language publications, allowed for the emergence of innovative projects and discourses at the margins of the Catalan cultural system, such as Barcelona's countercultural movement and Catalan-language literary experimentalism, known as *textualisme* (Cònsul 1997: 11–17; Crameri 2000: 8–10; Maestre 2006: 35–36; Picornell 2013: 34; Pons 2007: 48–58). At the time, Quim Monzó, who was working as a graphic designer to make a living, took his first steps as an artist and literary writer by participating in numerous countercultural and experimentalist projects of the time, which characteristically incorporated some of the new Western socio-cultural trends, including the sexual and drug revolution, pop culture and consumerism, hedonism, cinema and visual arts, pop and rock music. Counterculture and *textualisme* challenged the main tenets of the resistentialist cultural model in place in Catalonia under Francoism, which was based on the premise that there is an inextricable link between the Catalan language and nationalism and in which the literary production was perceived as an essential tool to resist Francoist oppression (Cornellà-Detrell 2011: 26; Fernández 2008: 110). Monzó was therefore part of a generation of young authors and artists who proposed new creative models and a new vision of culture as detached from the process of nation-building. Monzó's first works, a number of travel chronicles, were published in 1972 and 1973 in the newspaper *Tele/eXprés* and the magazines *Flashmen* and *Oriflama*.

Among many contributions to countercultural projects, Monzó published experimental texts and comics in publications such as *El Viejo Topo*, *Tecstual*, *Qwert Poiuy: Revista de Literatura* and the emblematic *Ajoblanco*, to which he also contributed by designing its first logo in 1974, inspired by the Coca-Cola's distinctive one. In 1975, Quim Monzó published his first novel, *L'udol del griso al caire de les clavegueres* [The Howl of the Gale on the Sewers' Edge], and in 1977 the short-story collection *Self-service*, which included eight short stories by Monzó and ten by Majorcan author Biel Mesquida. Both experimental books are part of the Catalan *textualist* literary movement, which problematized realist conventions in line with the poststructuralist and deconstructionist theories of Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes and the magazine *Tel Quel*. Between September 1976 and April 1978, Monzó published around sixty political cartoons and collages in the weekly cultural magazine *Canigó*, which strongly criticized the Spanish Transition to democracy as it was unfolding.

In 1978, Monzó published the short-story collection *Uf, va dir ell* [Jezz, He Said], which has been read by many critics as marking a new stage in the author's career, detached from the extreme experimentalism of previous works and aiming at a wider readership (Bou 1988: 408; Calafat 1992: 76–79; Guillamon 2004: 14; Maestre 2010: 239; Oller 1979: 91–7). This interpretation has been fuelled by Monzó's public detachment from literary experimentalism as well as by his refusal to re-publish *L'udol* and *Self-service*. However, scholars Isidor Cònsul (1995), Monserrat Lunati (2008) and Margalida Pons (2011) have challenged this division of Monzó's work into two different and well-defined stages, emphasizing instead the stylistic connections and thematic similarities between Monzó's literary production pre- and post-1978. These debates notwithstanding, in the 1980s Monzó was seen as a promising young author with a personal and innovative literary style and public voice. Monzó's literary and cultural project was widely influenced by his one-year stay in New York in 1982, where he acquainted himself with contemporary American literature and translated a number of authors from English into Catalan, including Donald Barthelme, Ray Bradbury, J.D. Salinger, Roald Dahl, Truman Capote and Robert Coover, among others. Nevertheless, the most important translations carried out by Monzó were those of John Barth's highly influential essays 'The Literature of Exhaustion' (1967) and 'The Literature of Replenishment – Postmodernist Fiction' (1980). Both texts were published in the journal *Els Marges* in 1983 and had a notable impact on the Catalan literary circles

(Calafat 1992: 72; Guillamon 1999: 24), which reveals Monzó's intention to disseminate American literature and cultural ideas in Catalonia at a time when the Catalan cultural system was in a process of redefinition and, thus ripe for the emergence of new literary models. In 1983, Monzó published the novel *Benzina* (*Gasoline*, 2010), which revolves around the vicissitudes of two Catalan painters residents in New York and displays some of the main topoi of Monzó's literature, namely: the representation of the everyday life of characters with flat personalities inhabiting late-capitalist urban settings; a focus on sexuality and individual desire; the crisis of hegemonic masculinities; the blurring of the boundaries between high and low culture and the associated loss of the artist's relevance in postmodern society. The relation between sex and death forms the basis of Monzó's third and last novel, *La magnitud de la tragèdia* (1989) [*The Enormity of the Tragedy*, 2007], regarded by many as one of his greatest works. The book tells the story of a bold, aging trumpet player who wakes up one day with a persistent erection that lasts for the entire plot.

In 1983, Monzó started his radio appearances in the newly-established *Catalunya Ràdio*. Together with Ramon Barnils and Jordi Vendrell, they conducted the late-night programme *El lloro, el moro, el mico i el senyor de Puerto Rico* (The Parrot, the Moor, the Monkey and the man from Puerto Rico). The characteristics that were to define Monzó's public performances in the future were already present in this radio show, including his ironic, defamiliarising take on social, political and cultural realities; a surrealist use of imagery and language play; a recourse to the vocabularies of nightlife, alcohol, drugs and sexual freedom; and, finally, an irreverent critique of the cultural and political tenets of Catalan nationalism. In so doing, the programme helped modernise the discourses of Catalan nationalism through self-referential parody and satirical commentary. During the 1980s, Monzó also published two short-story collections, *Olivetti, Moulinex, Chaffoteaux et Maury* (1980) [*O'Clock*, 1986] and *L'illa de Maïans* (1985) [*The Island of Maïans*], as well as the anthologies *El dia del senyor* (1984) [*Man's Day*] and *Zzzzzzzz* (1987), which compiled opinion articles published in newspapers such as *El Món*, *El Correo Catalán*, *Diari de Barcelona* and *Avui*. He also wrote the musical satire *El tango de Don Joan* (1986) [*Don Juan's Tango*] with Argentinian-French theatre director and actor Jérôme Savary.

The 1990s saw the consolidation of Quim Monzó as a key figure in contemporary Catalan culture. Two years stand out: 1993 and 1999. In 1993, Monzó published the immensely popular short-story collection *El perquè de tot plegat* [The Reason for Everything], some of whose stories were adapted into film by Ventura Pons in 1995, and started his participation in the late-night television show *Persones Humanes* (Human Persons), broadcast by the Catalan public television TV3 and which made him a household name in Catalan media. Similarly to the radio programme *El lloro*, *Persones Humanes* has acquired an almost cult status in the history of Catalan media. Monzó contributed a weekly monologue on a variety of topics in his characteristically pungent, defamiliarizing and highly comical style. His carefully crafted, yet seemingly spontaneous speeches helped towards his growing profile as a public intellectual who nevertheless engaged with popular themes (football, sexuality, celebrities) through accessible, non-erudite language. His monologue aired on 20 January 1994 poking fun at the daily lives of European royal families triggered a considerable controversy in Catalonia and Spain as a whole. The speech was so badly received by the Spanish Royal Family that Catalonia's President Jordi Pujol had to publicly apologise on behalf of Catalan public television. The episode featured in the front pages of Catalan newspapers, was widely commented on opinion articles and editorials, and received even more attention when Monzó was subsequently blacklisted from El Gran Wyoming's programme *El peor programa de la semana* (The Worst Programme of the Week) in Televisión Española. Not yet widely-known in Spain at the time, this controversy boosted Monzó's popularity with Spanish audiences.

In 1996, Monzó published *Guadalajara* [Guadalajara, 2011], a compilation of short stories which includes some of his most popular postmodern re-writings of traditional Western mythology and canonical literary texts, including Robin Hood, William Tell and Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. In 1999, most of Monzó's short stories published from 1978 until 1996 were collected in the highly successful volume *Vuitanta-sis contes* [Eighty-Six Short Stories]. Monzó wrote the dialogues of Bigas Luna's film *Jamón Jamón* (1992) together with Cuca Canals and continued to publish regular opinion pieces in Catalan newspapers such as *El Periódico de Catalunya* and *La Vanguardia* throughout the 1990s. These have been compiled in four volumes: *La maleta turca* (1990) [The Turkish Suitcase], *Hotel Intercontinental* (1991) [Intercontinental Hotel], *No plantaré cap arbre* (1994) [I Won't Plant Any Tree] and

Del tot indefens davant dels hostils imperis alienígenes (1998) [Totally Defenceless Facing the Hostile Extraterrestrial Empires]. Monzó's articles, which transgress the boundaries between opinion and fiction à la New Journalism, do not shy away from highly controversial themes such as nationalisms in Spain, political correctness, contemporary feminism and non-sexist language and are highly popular thanks to a provocative and biting style which reminds that of political cartooning.

In the 2000s, Monzó published two short-story compilations, *El millor dels mons* (2001) [The Best of Worlds] and *Mil cretins* (2007) [*A Thousand Morons*, 2012] – adapted to cinema in 2011 by Ventura Pons. *El millor dels mons* features the novella 'Davant del rei de Suècia' [In Front of the Swedish King], in which Monzó mocks the discourses of Catalan cultural normalization through the story of a poet obsessed with the Nobel Prize. The short-story collection *Tres Nadals* (2003) [Three Christmas] and the compilation of opinion pieces *Esplendor i glòria de la Internacional Papanates* (2010) [Splendour and Glory of the Simpletons' Internationale] illustrate Monzó's response to the culture wars. Similarly to contemporary European male authors such as Michel Houellebecq and Javier Marías, Monzó's texts are strongly critical of the main tenets of political correctness as well as progressive movements like feminism, anti-war protests, trade unionism and modern education pedagogies. Already in the 1990s, Monzó had intervened in this debate through his translation into Catalan of James Finn Garner's *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* (1994), which he carried out in collaboration with Maria Roura. Their translation, entitled *Contes per a nens i nenes políticament correctes* (1995), came out only one year after the original book and further illustrates Monzó's translational and transcultural role as a mediator in contemporary Catalan culture. After the September 11 attacks, Monzó travelled to New York and published a series of chronicles in the Catalan press, later compiled alongside other travel writings in the volume *Catorze ciutats comptant-hi Brooklyn* (2004) [Fourteen Cities Counting Brooklyn]. In the early 2000s, two compilation of polemical articles were also published: *Tot és mentida* (2000) [Everything is a Lie] and *El tema del tema* (2003) [The Theme of the Theme]. In 2001, Monzó appeared on Catalan public television again playing himself in an episode of *Plats bruts* (Dirty Dishes), a successful sitcom that was broadcast for three years on TV3. Monzó's participation in the series as author Quim Monzó demonstrates his popularity among a non-specialist audience in turn of the century Catalonia.

Monzó's popularity and recognition continued to rise in the 2000s, particularly after he was chosen to deliver the opening lecture at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2007, when Catalan culture was the Guest of Honour. Conceived as a short story, Monzó's speech condensed the foremost aspects of his work, as it included humour, irony and parody as well as intertextuality and metafiction. Received with high praise in Catalonia, Monzó's speech, and by extension his career, came to symbolize a new, postmodern Catalan culture which had definitely left behind the dark times of Francoism and the associated discourses of cultural resistance (Bargalló 2008: 48; Cònsul 2008: 130; Galves 2008: 81; Puigdevall 2008: 101). Two years later, in 2009, an exhibition about Monzó's life and work was organized at the Arts Santa Mònica in Barcelona, with visitors significantly outnumbering figures achieved by expositions on canonical authors Mercè Rodoreda, Josep Palau i Fabre and Joan Perucho. This was complemented by the publication of a book/catalogue entitled *Quim Monzó. Com triomfar a la vida* [Quim Monzó. How to Succeed in Life], which covered all aspects of the author's life and work.

In the present day, Quim Monzó is acclaimed as the creator of a literary style that has set its mark in twentieth- and twenty-first century Catalan literature and, for this reason, he has been considered the literary forefather of authors such as Empar Moliner, Imma Monsó, Sergi Pàmies, Jordi Puntí, Lluïcia Ramis and Màrius Serra (Camps 2008: 102; Dasca 2008: 133–134; Guillamon 2008: 5; Maestre 2012: 17–25; Marrugat 2014: 55). Monzó has not published fiction since *Mil cretins* (2007) and his latest book, *Taula i barra* (2017) [Table and Bar], is a compilation of opinion pieces published by La Vanguardia Ediciones. This is the first book authored by Monzó since 1978 which is not published by the emblematic independent publishing house Quaderns Crema, founded by the late editor Jaume Vallcorba (1949–2014), therefore closing a collaboration that has undeniably had an impact on contemporary Catalan literature and culture. Monzó's presence in the public arena has not decreased owing to his opinion pieces and participation in radio and television programmes as well as his active presence in the social network Twitter, which has further developed his profile as an approachable public figure who is also in tune with recent transformations in media and communication. In September 2013, Monzó played the leading role together with actor Juanjo Puigcorbé in the promotional video of the Via Catalana, a 480-kilometre human

chain in support of Catalan independence from Spain, held on 11 September 2013. From the national tensions between Catalonia and Spain and the progressive transitioning from resistentialism to cultural normalization, to the clashes between high literary capital and the marketplace Quim Monzó's work and career provide an excellent platform from which to understand the main shifts undergone by the Catalan cultural field in the last forty years.

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